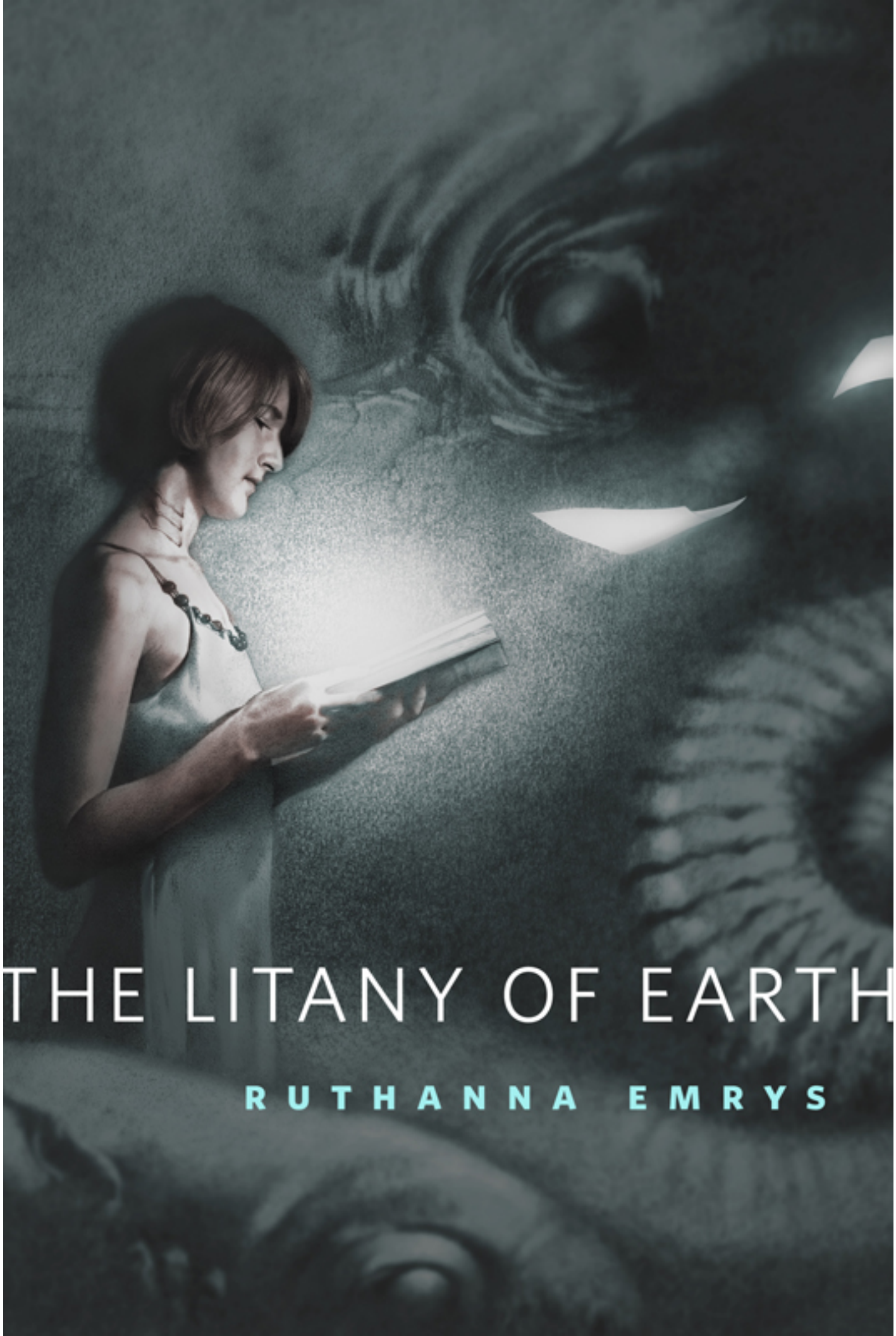
THE LITANY OF EARTH
RUTHANNA EMRYS

The Litany of Earth

RUTHANNA EMRYS

illustration by

ALLEN WILLIAMS

TOR·COM

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Begin Reading

Winter Tide Teaser

After a year in San Francisco, my legs grew strong again. A hill and a half lay between the bookstore where I found work and the apartment I shared with the Kotos. Every morning and evening I walked, breathing mist and rain into my desert-scarred lungs, and every morning the walk was a little easier. Even at the beginning, when my feet ached all day from the unaccustomed strain, it was a hill and a half that I hadn't been permitted for seventeen years.

In the evenings, the radio told what I had missed: an earth-spanning war, and atrocities in Europe to match and even exceed what had been done to both our peoples. We did not ask, the Kotos and I, whether our captors too would eventually be called to justice. The Japanese American community, for the most part, was trying to put the camps behind them. And it was not the way of my folk—who had grown resigned to the camps long before the Kotos' people were sent to join us, and who no longer had a community on land—to dwell on impossibilities.

That morning, I had received a letter from my brother. Caleb didn't write often, and hearing from him was equal parts relief and uncomfortable reminder. His grammar was good, but his handwriting and spelling revealed the paucity of his lessons. He had written:

> *The town is a ruin, but not near enouff of one. Houses still stand; even a few windos are whole. It has all been looked over most carefully long ago, but I think forgotten or ignorred since.*

And:

> *I looked through our library, and those of other houses, but there is not a book or torn page left on the shelves. I have saugt permisson to look throuh the collecton at Miskatonic, but they are putting me off. I very much fear that the most importent volumes were placed in some government warehouse to be forgotten—as we were.*

So, our family collections were still lost. I remembered the feel of the old pages, my father leaning over me, long fingers tracing a difficult passage as he explained its meaning—and my mother, breaking in with some simple suggestion that cut to the heart of it. Now, the only books I had to work with were the basic texts and single children's spellbook in the store's backroom collection. The texts, in fact, belonged to Charlie—my boss—and I bartered my half-remembered childhood Enochian and R'lyehn for access.

Charlie looked up and frowned as the bells announced my arrival. He had done that from the first time I came in to apply, and so far as I knew gave all his customers the same glare.

"Miss Marsh."

I closed my eyes and breathed in the paper-sweet dust. "I'm not late, Mr. Day."

"We need to finish the inventory this morning. You can start with the westerns."

I stuck my purse behind the counter and headed back toward the piles of spine-creased Edgar Rice Burroughs and Zane Grey. "What I like about you," I said honestly, "is that you don't pretend to be civil."

"And dry off first." But no arguments, by now, that I ought to carry an umbrella or wear a jacket. No questions about why I liked the damp and chill, second only to the company of old books. Charlie wasn't unimaginative, but he kept his curiosity to himself.

I spent the rest of the morning shelving. Sometimes I would read a passage at random, drinking in the impossible luxury of ink organized into meaningful patterns. Very occasionally I would bring one forward and read a bit aloud to Charlie, who would harumph at me and continue with his work, or read me a paragraph of his own.

By midafternoon I was holding down the register while Charlie did something finicky and specific with the cookbooks. The bells jangled. A man poked his head in, sniffed cautiously, and made directly for me.

“Excuse me. I’m looking for books on the occult—for research.” He smiled, a salesman’s too-open expression, daring me to disapprove. I showed him to the shelf where we kept Crowley and other such nonsense, and returned to the counter frowning thoughtfully.

After a few minutes, he returned. “None of that is quite what I’m looking for. Do you keep anything more … esoteric?”

“I’m afraid not, sir. What you see is what we have.”

He leaned across the counter. His scent, ordinary sweat and faint cologne, insinuated itself against me, and I stepped back out of reach. “Maybe something in a storage room? I’m sure you must have more than these turn-of-the-century fakers. Some Al-Hazred, say? Prinn’s *Vermis*?”

I tried not to flinch. I knew the look of the old families, and he had none of it—tall and dark-haired and thin-faced, conventional attractiveness marred by nothing more than a somewhat square nose. Nor was he cautious in revealing his familiarity with the Aeonist canon, as Charlie had been. He was either stupid, or playing with me.

“I’ve never heard of either,” I said. “We don’t specialize in esoterica; I’m afraid you’d better try another store.”

“I don’t think that’s necessary.” He drew himself straighter, and I took another step back. He smiled again, in a way I thought was intended to be friendly, but seemed rather the bare-toothed threat of an ape. “Miss Aphra Marsh. I know you’re familiar with these things, and I’m sure we can help each other.”

I held my ground and gave my mother’s best glare. “You have me mistaken, sir. If you are not in the store to purchase goods that we actually have, I strongly suggest that you look elsewhere.”

He shrugged and held out his hands. “Perhaps later.”

Charlie limped back to the counter as the door rang the man’s departure. “Customer?”

“No.” My hands were trembling, and I clasped them behind my back. “He wanted to know about your private shelf. Charlie, I don’t like him. I don’t trust him.”

He frowned again and glanced toward the employees-only door. “Thief?”

That would have been best, certainly. My pulse fluttered in my throat. “Well informed, if so.”

Charlie must have seen how hard I was holding myself. He found the metal thermos and offered it silently. I shook my head, and with a surge of dizziness found myself on the floor. I wrapped my arms around my knees and continued to shake my head at whatever else might be offered.

“He might be after the books,” I forced out at last. “Or he might be after us.”

He crouched next to me, moving slowly with his bad knee and the stiffness of joints beginning to admit mortality. “For having the books?”

I shook my head again. “Yes. Or for being the sort of people who would have them.” I stared at my interlaced fingers, long and bony, as though they might be thinking about growing extra joints. There was no way to explain the idea I had, that the smiling man might come back with more men, and guns, and vans that locked in the back. And probably he was only a poorly spoken dabbler, harmless. “He knew my name.”

Charlie pulled himself up and into a chair, settling with a grunt. “I don’t suppose he could have been one of those Yith you told me about?”

I looked up, struck by the idea. I had always thought of the Great Race as solemn and wise, and meeting one was supposed to be very lucky. But they were also known to be arrogant and abrupt, when they wanted something. It was a nice thought. “I don’t think so. They have phrases, secret ways of making themselves known to people who would recognize them. I’m afraid he was just a man.”

“Well.” Charlie got to his feet. “No help for it unless he comes back. Do you need to go home early?”

That was quite an offer, coming from Charlie, and I couldn’t bear the thought that I looked like I needed it. I eased myself off the floor, the remaining edge of fear making me slow and clumsy. “Thank you. I’d rather stay here. Just warn me if you see him again.”

* * *

The first change in my new life, also heralded by a customer …

It is not yet a month since my return to the world. I am still weak, my skin sallow from malnourishment and dehydration. After my first look in a good mirror, I have shaved my brittle locks to the quick, and the new are growing in ragged, but thick and rich and dark like my mother’s. My hair as an adult woman, which I have never seen ‘til now.

I am shelving when a familiar phrase stings my ears. Hope and danger, tingling together as I drift forward, straining to hear more.

The blond man is trying to sell Charlie a copy of the *Book of the Grey People*, but it soon becomes apparent that he knows little but the title. I should be more cautious than I am next, should think more carefully about what I reveal. But I like Charlie, his gruffness and his honesty and the endless difference between him and everything I have hated or loved. I don’t like to see him taken in.

The blond man startles when I appear by his shoulder, but when I pull the tome over to flip the pages, he tries to regroup. “Now just a minute here, young lady. This book is valuable.”

I cannot imagine that I truly look less than my thirty years. “This book is a fake. Is this supposed to be Enochian?”

“Of course it’s Enochian. Let me—”

“Ab-kar-rak al-laz-kar-nef—” I sound out the paragraph in front of me. “This was written by someone who had heard Enochian once, and vaguely

recalled the sound of it. It's gibberish. And in the wrong alphabet, besides. And the binding…" I run my hand over it and shudder. "The binding is real skin. Which makes this a very expensive fake for *someone*, but the price has already been paid. Take this abomination away."

Charlie looks at me as the blond man leaves. I draw myself up, determined to make the best of it. I can always work at the laundromat with Anna.

"You know Enochian?" he asks. I'm startled by the gentleness—and the hope. I can hardly lie about it now, but I don't give more than the bare truth.

"I learned it as a child."

His eyes sweep over my face; I hold myself impassive against his judgment. "I believe you keep secrets, and keep them well," he says at last. "I don't plan to pry. But I want to show you one of mine, if you can keep that too."

This isn't what I was expecting. But he might learn more about me, someday, as much as I try to hide. And when that happens, I'll need a reason to trust him. "I promise."

"Come on back." He turns the door sign before leading me to the storage room that has been locked all the weeks I've worked here.

* * *

I stayed as late as I could, until I realized that if someone was asking after me, the Kotos might be in danger as well. I didn't want to call, unsure if the phone lines would be safe. All the man had done was talk to me—I might never see him again. Even so, I would be twitching for weeks. You don't forget the things that can develop from other people's small suspicions.

The night air was brisk, chilly by most people's standards. The moon watched over the city, soft and gibbous, outlines blurred by San Francisco's ubiquitous mist. Sounds echoed closer than their objects. I might have been swimming, sensations carried effortlessly on ocean currents. I licked salt

from my lips, and prayed. I wished I could break the habit, but I wished more, still, that just once it would work.

"Miss Marsh!" The words pierced the damp night. I breathed clean mist and kept walking. *Iä, Cthulhu ...*

"Please, Miss Marsh, I just need a moment of your time." The words were polite enough, but the voice was too confident. I walked faster, and strained my ears for his approach. Soft soles would not tap, but a hissing squelch marked every step on the wet sidewalk. I could not look back; I could not run: either would be an admission of guilt. He would chase me, or put a bullet in my skull.

"You have me mistaken," I said loudly. The words came as a sort of croak.

I heard him speed up, and then he was in front of me, mist clinging to his tall form. Perforce, I stopped. I wanted to escape, or call for help, but I could not imagine either.

"What do you want, sir?" The stiff words came more easily this time. It occurred to me belatedly that if he did not know what I was, he might try to force himself on me, as the soldiers sometimes had with the Japanese girls in the camp. I couldn't bring myself to fear the possibility; he moved like a different kind of predator.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I'm afraid we may have gotten off to a bad start, earlier. I'm Ron Spector; I'm with the FBI—"

He started to offer a badge, but the confirmation of my worst fears released me from my paralysis. I lashed out with one newly strong leg and darted to the side. I had intended to race home and warn the Kotos, but instead he caught his balance and grabbed my arm. I turned and grappled, scratching and pulling, all the time aware that my papa had died fighting this way. I expected the deadly shot at any moment, and struggled while I could. But my arms were weaker than Papa's, and even my legs were not what they should have been.

Gradually, I realized that Spector was only trying to hold me off, not fighting for his life, nor even for mine. He kept repeating my name, and at last:

"Please, Miss Marsh! I'm not trained for this!" He pushed me back again, and grunted as my nails drew blood on his unprotected wrist. "Please! I don't mean you any harm; I just want to talk for five minutes. Five minutes, I promise, and then you can stay or go as you please!"

My panic could not sustain itself, and I stilled at last. Even then, I was afraid that given the chance, he would clap me in irons. But we held our tableau, locked hand to wrist. His mortal pulse flickered mouse-like against my fingertips, and I was sure he could feel mine roaring like the tide.

"If I let you go, will you listen?"

I breathed in strength from the salt fog. "Five minutes, you said."

"Yes." He released me, and rubbed the skin below his wristwatch. "I'm sorry, I should have been more circumspect. I know what you've been through."

"Do you." I controlled my shaking with effort. I was a Marsh; I would not show weakness to an enemy. They had drunk deep of it already.

He looked around and took a careful seat on one of the stones bordering a nearby yard. It was too short for him, so that his knees bent upward when he sat. He leaned forward: a praying mantis in a black suit.

"Most religions consist largely of good people trying to get by. No matter what names they worship, or what church they go to, or what language they pray in. Will you agree with me on this much?"

I folded my arms and waited.

"And every religion has its fanatics, who are willing to do terrible things in the name of their god. No one is immune." His lips quirked. "It's a failing of humanity, not of any particular sect."

"I'll grant you that. What of it?" I counted seconds in drips of water. I could almost imagine the dew clinging to my skin as a shield.

He shrugged and smiled. I didn't like how easy he could be, with his wrist still stinking of blood. "If you grant me that, you're already several steps ahead of the U.S. government, just post–World War I. In the twenties, they had run-ins with a couple of nasty Aeonist groups. There was one cult down in Louisiana that had probably never seen an original bit of the canon, but they had their ideas. Sacrificial corpses hanging from trees, the whole nine yards." He glanced at me, checking for some reaction. I did not grant it.

"Not exactly representative, but we got the idea that was normal. In '26, the whole religion were declared enemies of the state, and we started looking out for anyone who said the wrong names on Sunday night, or had the wrong statues in their churches. You know where it goes from there."

I did, and wondered how much he really knew. It was strange, nauseating, to hear the justifications, even as he tried to hold them at a distance.

"It won't shock you," he continued, "to know that Innsmouth wasn't the only place that suffered. Eventually, it occurred to the government that they might have overgeneralized, but it took a long time for changes to go through. Now we're starting to have people like me, who actually study Aeonist culture and try to separate out the bad guys, but it's been a long time coming."

I held myself very still through his practiced speech. "If this is by way of an apology, Mr. Spector, you can drown in it. What you did was beyond the power of any apology."

"Doubtless we owe you one anyway, if we can find a decent way of making it. But I'm afraid I've been sent to speak with you for practical reasons." He cleared his throat and shifted his knees. "As you may imagine, when the government went hunting Aeonists, it was much easier to find good people, minding their own business in small towns, than cultists well-practiced in conspiracy and murder. The bad guys tend to be better at

hiding, after all. And at the same time, we weren't trying to recruit people who knew anything useful about the subject—after a while, few would have been willing even if we went looking. So now, as with the Japanese American community, we find ourselves shorthanded, ignorant, and having angered the people least likely to be a danger to the country."

My eye sockets ached. "I cannot believe that you are trying to recruit me."

"I'm afraid that's exactly what I'm doing. I could offer—"

"Your five minutes are up, sir." I walked past him, biting back anything else I might say, or think. The anger worked its way into my shoulders, and my legs, and the rush of my blood.

"Miss Marsh!"

Against my better judgment, I stopped and turned back. I imagined what I must look like to him. Bulging eyes; wide mouth; long, bony legs and fingers. "The Innsmouth look," when there was an Innsmouth. Did it signal danger to him? Something more than human, or less? Perhaps he saw just an ugly woman, someone whose reactions he could dismiss until he heard what he wanted.

Then I would speak clearly.

"Mr. Spector, I have no interest in being an enemy of the state. The state is larger than I. But nor will I be any part of it. And if you insist, you will listen to why. *The state* stole nearly two decades of my life. *The state* killed my father, and locked the rest of my family away from anything they thought might give us strength. Salt water. Books. Knowledge. One by one, they destroyed us. My mother began her metamorphosis. Allowed the ocean, she might have lived until the sun burned to ashes. They took her away. We know they studied us at such times, to better know the process. To better know how to hurt us. You must imagine the details, as I have. They never returned the bodies. Nothing has been given back to us.

"Now, ask me again."

He bent his head at last. Not in shame, I thought, but listening. Then he spoke softly. “The state is not one entity. It is *changing*. And when it changes, it’s good for everyone. The people you could help us stop are truly hurting others. And the ones being hurt know nothing of what was done to your family. Will you hold the actions of a few against them? Should more families suffer because yours did?”

I reminded myself that, after humanity faded and died, a great insectoid civilization would live in these hills. After that, the Sareeav, with their pseudopods and strange sculptures. Therefore, I could show patience. “I will do what I can for suffering on my own.”

More quietly: “If you helped us, even on one matter, I might be able to find out what really happened to your mother.”

The guilt showed plainly on his face as soon as he said it, but I still had to turn away. “I cannot believe that even after her death, you would dare hold my mother hostage for my good behavior. You can keep her body, and your secrets.” And in R’lyehn, because we had been punished for using it in the camps, I added, “And if they hang your corpse from a tree, I will kiss the ground beneath it.” Then, fearful that he might do more, or say more, I ran.

I kicked off my shoes, desperate for speed. My feet slapped the wet ground. I could not hear whether Spector followed me. I was still too weak, as weak as I had been as a child, but I was taller, and faster, and the fog wrapped me and hid me and sped me on my flight.

Some minutes later I ducked into a side drive. Peering out, I saw no one following me. Then I let myself gasp: deep, shuddering breaths. I wanted him dead. I wanted them all dead, as I had for seventeen years. Probably some of them were: they were only ordinary humans, with creaking joints and rivulet veins. I could be patient.

I came in barefoot to the Kotos. Mama Rei was in the kitchen. She put down her chopping knife, and held me while I shook. Then Anna took my

hand and drew me over to the table. The others hovered nearby, Neko looking concerned and Kevin sucking his thumb. He reminded me so very much of Caleb.

"What happened?" asked Anna, and I told them everything, trying to be calm and clear. They had to know.

Mama Rei tossed a handful of onions into the pan and started on the peppers. She didn't look at me, but she didn't need to. "Aphra-chan—Kappa-sama—what do you think he wants?"

I started to rub my face, then winced. Spector's blood, still on my nails, cut through the clean smell of frying onion. "I don't know. Perhaps only what he said, but his masters will certainly be angry when he fails to recruit me. He might seek ways to put pressure on me. It's not safe. I'm sorry."

"I don't want to leave," said Neko. "We just got here." I closed my eyes hard against the sting.

"We won't leave," said Mama Rei. "We are trying to build a decent life here, and I won't be scared away from it. Neither will you, Aphra-chan. This government man can only do so much to us, without a law to say he can lock us up."

"There was no law countenancing the things done to my family," I said.

"Times have changed," she said firmly. "People are watching, now."

"They took your whole town," said Anna, almost gently. "They can't take all of San Francisco, can they, Mama?"

"Of course not. We will live our lives, and you will all go to work and school tomorrow, and we will be careful. That is all."

There was no arguing with Mama Rei, and I didn't really want to. I loved the life I had, and if I lost it again, well … the sun would burn to ash soon enough, and then it would make little difference whether I had a few months of happiness here, or a few years. I fell asleep praying.

* * *

One expects the storage room of a bookstore to hold more books. And it does. Books in boxes, books on shelves, books piled on the floor and the birch table with uneven legs. And one bookshelf more solid than the others, leaves and vines carved into dark wood. The sort that one buys for too much money, to hold something that feels like it deserves the respect.

And on the shelves, my childhood mixed with dross. I hold up my hand, afraid to touch, to run it across the titles, a finger's breadth away. I fear that they too will change to gibberish. Some of them already are. Some are titles I know to have been written by charlatans, or fakes as obvious as the blond man's *Grey People*. And some are real.

"Where did you get these?"

"At auction. At estate sales. From people who come in offering to sell, or other stores that don't know what they have. To tell the truth, I don't entirely either, for some of them. You might have a better idea?"

I pull down a *Necronomicon* with shaking hands, the one of his three that looks real. The inside page is thankfully empty—no dedication, no list of family names. No chance of learning whether it ever belonged to someone I knew. I read the first page, enough to recognize the over-poetic Arabic, and put it back before my eyes can tear up. I take another, this one in true Enochian.

"Why buy them, if you can't read them?"

"Because I might be able to, someday. Because I might be able to learn something, even with a word or two. Because I want to learn magic, if you must know, and this is the closest I can come." His glare dares me to scoff.

I hold out the book I've been cradling. "You could learn from this one, you know. It's a child's introductory text. I learned a little from it, myself, before I … lost access to my library." My glare dares him to ask. He doesn't intrude on my privacy, no more than I laugh at what he's revealed. "I don't know enough to teach you properly. But if you let me share your books, I'll

help you learn as best I can." He nods, and I turn my head aside so my tears don't fall on the text—or where he can see.

* * *

I returned to work the next day, wearing shoes borrowed from neighbors. My feet were far too big for anything the Kotos could lend me. Anna walked me partway before turning off for the laundromat—her company more comfort than I cared to admit.

I had hovered by the sink before breakfast, considering what to do about the faint smudge of Spector's blood. In the end, I washed it off. A government agent, familiar with the Aeonist canons, might well know how to detect the signs if I used it against him.

Despite my fears, that day was a quiet one, full of customers asking for westerns and romances and textbooks. The next day was the same, and the day after that, and three weeks passed with the tension between my shoulder blades the only indication that something was amiss.

At the end of those three weeks, he came again. His body language had changed: a little hunched, a little less certain. I stiffened, but did not run. Charlie looked up from the stack of incoming books, and gave the requisite glare.

"That's him," I murmured.

"Ah." The glare deepened. "You're not welcome here. Get out of my store, and don't bother my employees again."

Spector straightened, recovering a bit of his old arrogance. "I have something for Miss Marsh. Then I'll go."

"Whatever you have to offer, I don't want it. You heard Mr. Day: you're trespassing."

He ducked his head. "I found your mother's records. I'm not offering them in exchange for anything. You were right, that wasn't … wasn't honorable. Once you've seen them—if you want to see them—I'll go."

I held out my hand. “Very well. I’ll take them. And then you will leave.”

He held on to the thick folder. “I’m sorry, Miss Marsh. I’ve got to stay with them. They aren’t supposed to be out of the building, and I’m not supposed to have them right now. I’ll be in serious trouble if I lose them.”

I didn’t care if he got in trouble, and I didn’t want to see what was in the folder. But it was my mother’s only grave. “Mr. Day,” I said quietly. “I would like a few minutes of privacy, if you please.”

Charlie took a box and headed away, but paused. “You just shout if this fellow gives you any trouble.” He gave Spector another glare before heading into the stacks—I suspected not very far.

Spector handed me the folder. I opened it, cautiously, between the cash register and a short stack of Agatha Christie novels. For a moment I closed my eyes, fixing my mother’s living image in my mind. I remembered her singing a sacred chanty in the kitchen, arguing with shopkeepers, kneeling in the wet sand at Solstice. I remembered one of our neighbors crying in our sitting room after her husband’s boat was lost in a storm, telling her, “Your faith goes all the way to the depths. Some of us aren’t so lucky.”

“I’m sorry,” Spector said quietly. “It’s ugly.”

They had taken her deeper into the desert, to an experimental station. They had caged her. They had given her weights to lift, testing her strength. They had starved her for days, testing her endurance. They had cut her, confusing their mythologies, with iron and silver, noting healing times. They had washed her once with seawater, then fresh, then scrubbed her with dry salt. After that, they had refused her all contact with water, save a minimum to drink. Then not even that. For the whole of sixty-seven days, they carefully recorded her pulse, her skin tone, and the distance between her eyes. Perhaps in some vague way also interested in our culture, they copied, faithfully, every word she spoke.

Not one sentence was a prayer.

There were photos, both from the experiments and the autopsy afterward. I did not cry. It seemed extravagant to waste salt water so freely.

"Thank you," I said quietly, closing the folder, bile burning the back of my throat. He bowed his head.

"My mother came to the states young." He spoke deliberately, neither rushing to share nor stumbling over his apparent honesty. Anything else, I would have felt justified interrupting. "Her sister stayed in Poland. She was a bit older, and she had a sweetheart. I have files on her, too. She survived. She's in a hospital in Israel, and sometimes she can feed herself." He stopped, took a deep breath, shook his head. "I can't think of anything that would convince me to work for the new German government—no matter how different it is from the old. I'm sorry I asked."

He took the folder and turned away.

"Wait." I should not have said it. He'd probably staged the whole thing. But it was a far more thoughtful manipulation than the threats I had expected—and I found myself afraid to go on ignoring my enemies. "I will not work for you. But tell me about these frightening new Aeonists."

Whatever—if anything—I eventually chose to pass on to Spector, I realized that I very much wanted to meet them. For all the Kotos' love and comfort, and for all Charlie's eager learning, I still missed Innsmouth. These mortals might be the closest I could come to home.

* * *

"Why do you want to learn this?" Though I doubt Charlie knows, it's a ritual question. There is no ritual answer.

"I don't…" He glares, a habit my father would have demanded he break before pursuing the ancient scholarship. "Some things don't go into words easily, all right? It's … it feels like what *should* be in books, I suppose. They should all be able to change the world. At least a little."

I nod. “That’s a good answer. Some people think that ‘power’ is a good answer, and it isn’t. The power that can be found in magic is less than what you get from a gun, or a badge, or a bomb.” I pause. “I’m trying to remember all the things I need to tell you, now, at the beginning. What magic is *for* is understanding. Knowledge. And it won’t work until you know how little that gets you.

“*Sharhlyda*—Aeonism—is a bit like a religion. But this isn’t the Bible—most of the things I’m going to tell you are things we have records of: histories older than man, and sometimes the testimony of those who lived them. The gods you can take or leave, but the history is real.

“All of man’s other religions place him at the center of creation. But man is nothing—a fraction of the life that will walk the Earth. Earth is nothing—a tiny world that will die with its sun. The sun is one of trillions where life flowers, and wants to live, and dies. And between the suns is an endless vast darkness that dwarfs them, through which life can travel only by giving up that wanting, by losing itself. Even that darkness will eventually die. In such a universe, knowledge is the stub of a candle at dusk.”

“You make it all sound so cheerful.”

“It’s honest. What our religion tells us, the part that is a religion, is that the gods created life to try and make meaning. It’s ultimately hopeless, and even gods die, but the effort is real. Will always have been real, even when everything is over and no one remembers.”

Charlie looks dubious. I didn’t believe it, either, when I first started learning. And I was too young then to find it either frightening or comforting.

* * *

I thought about what Mr. Spector had told me, and about what I might do with the information. Eventually I found myself, unofficially and entirely

on my own recognizance, in a better part of the city, past sunset, at the door of a home rather nicer than the Kotos'. It was no mansion by any imagining, but it was long lived-in and well kept up: two stories of brick and Spanish tile roof, with juniper guarding the façade. The door was painted a cheerful yellow, but the knocker was a fantastical wrought-iron creature that reminded me painfully of home. I lifted the cold metal and rapped sharply. Then I waited, shivering.

The man who opened the door looked older than Charlie. His gray hair frizzed around the temples and ears, otherwise slick as a seal. Faint lines creased his cheeks. He frowned at me. I hoped I had the right address.

"My name is Aphra Marsh," I said. "Does that mean anything to you? I understand that some in this house still follow the old ways."

He started, enough to tell me that he recognized my family's name. He shuffled back a little, but then leaned forward. "Where did you hear such a thing?"

"My family have their ways. May I enter?"

He stepped aside to let me in, in too reluctant a fashion to be truly gallant. His pupils widened between narrowed eyelids, and he licked his lips.

"What do you want, my lady?"

Ignoring the question for the moment, I stepped inside. The foyer, and what I could see of the parlor, looked pedestrian but painfully familiar. Dark wood furniture, much of it bookshelves, contrasted with leaf-green walls. Yet it was all a bit shabby—not quite as recently dusted or mended as would have satisfied my mother's pride. A year ago, it might have been the front room of any of the better houses in Innsmouth. Now … I wondered what my family home had looked like, in the years after my mother was no longer there to take pride in it. I put the thought forcibly out of my mind.

"… in the basement," he was saying. "Would you like to see?"

I ran my memory back through the last seconds, and discovered that he was, in fact, offering to show me where they practiced “the old ways.” “I would. But an introduction might be in order first?”

“My apologies, my lady. I am Oswin Wilder. High priest here, although probably not a very traditional one by your standards.”

“I make no judgment.” And I smiled at him in a way that suggested I might well do so later. It was strange. In Innsmouth, non-Sharhlyd outsiders had looked on us with fear and revulsion—even the Sharhlyd who were not of our kind, mostly the nervously misanthropic academics at Miskatonic, treated us with suspicion. Respect was usually subordinated to rivalries over the proper use of ancient texts. The few mortal humans who shared both our town and our faith had deferred openly, but without this taint of resentment.

He led me down solid wooden steps. I half expected a hidden sub-basement or a dungeon—I think he must have wanted one—but he had worked with the home he already had. Beyond the bare flagstone at the foot of the stairs, he had merely added a raised level of dark tile, painted with sigils and patterns. I recognized a few, but suspected more of being his own improvisations. At the far end of the room, candles flickered on a cloth-covered table. I approached, moving carefully around the simple stone altar in the center.

On the table sat a devotional statue of Cthulhu. I hardly noticed the quality of the carving or the material, although my childhood priest would have had something to say about both. But my childhood was long discarded, and the display struck my adult doubts with forgotten force. Heedless of the man behind me, I knelt. The flickering light gave a wet sheen to tentacles and limbs, and I could almost imagine again that they were reaching to draw me in and keep me safe. Where the statue in Innsmouth’s church had depicted the god with eyes closed, to represent the mysteries of the deep, this one’s eyes were open, black and fathomless. I returned the gaze, refusing to bow my head.

Have you been waiting for us? Do you regret what happened? With all your aeons, did you even notice that Innsmouth was gone? Or did you just wonder why fewer people came to the water?

Are you listening, now? Were you ever there to listen?

More tears, I realized too late—not something I would have chosen for the priest to see. But I flicked a drop of my salt water onto the statue, and whispered the appropriate prayer. I found it oddly comforting. My mother, old-fashioned, had kept a jar of seawater on the counter for washing tear-streaked faces, and brought it to temple once a month. But I had still given my tears to the god when I didn't want her fussing, or was trying to hide a fight with my brother.

We were near the ocean now. Perhaps the Kotos could spare a jar.

My musings were interrupted by the creak of the basement door and a tremulous alto.

"Oz? I knocked, but no one answered—are you down here?"

"Mildred, yes. Come on down; we have a guest."

Full skirts, garnet red, descended, and as she came closer I saw a woman bearing all my mother's remembered dignity. She had the air of magnificence that fortunate mortals gained with age; her wrinkles and gray-streaked hair only gave the impression of deliberate artistic choices. I stood and ducked my head politely. She looked me over, thin-lipped.

"Mil—Miss Marsh," said Wilder. "Allow me to introduce Mildred Bergman. Mildred, this is Miss Aphra Marsh." He paused dramatically, and her frown deepened.

"And what is she doing in our sanctum?"

"Miss *Marsh*," he repeated.

"Anyone can claim a name. Even such an illustrious one." I winced, then lifted my chin. There was no reason for me to feel hurt: her doubt should be no worse a barrier than Wilder's nervous pride.

Taking a candle from the altar for light—and with a whisper of thanks to Cthulhu for the loan—I stepped toward her. She stood her ground. "Look at me."

She looked me up and down, making a show of it. Her eyes stayed narrow, and if I had studied long enough to hear thoughts, and done the appropriate rites, I was sure I would have heard it. *Anyone can be ugly.*

Wilder moved to intervene. "This is silly. We have no reason to doubt her. And she found us on her own. She must have some knowledge of the old arts: we don't exactly put our address in the classifieds. Let it go and give her a chance to prove herself."

Bergman sniffed and shrugged. Moving faster than I would have expected, she plucked the candle from my hand and replaced it on the table. "As high priest, it is of course at your discretion what newcomers must do to join the elect. The others will be here soon; we'll see what they think of your guest."

I blinked at her. "I'll wait, then." I turned my back and knelt again at the god's table. I would not let her see my rage at her dismissal, or the fear that the gesture of defiance cost me.

* * *

The first and most basic exercise in magic is looking at oneself. Truly looking, truly seeing—and I am afraid. I cannot quite persuade myself that the years in the camp haven't stolen something vital. After doing this simple thing, I will know.

I sit opposite Charlie on the plain wood floor of the storage room. He has dragged over a rag rug and the cushion from a chair for his knees, but I welcome the cool solidity. Around us I have drawn a first-level seal in red chalk, and between us placed two bowls of salt water and two knives. I have walked him through this in the book, told him what to expect, as well as I am able. I remember my father, steady and patient as he explained the

rite. I may be more like my mother—impatient with beginners' mistakes, even my own.

I lead him through a grounding: tell him to imagine the sea in his veins, his body as a torrent of blood and breath. I simplify the imagery I learned as a child. He has no metamorphosis to imagine, no ancestors to tell him how those things feel under the weight of the depths. But he closes his eyes and breathes, and I imagine it as wind on a hot day. He is a man of the air, after all. I must tell him the Litany so he will know what that means, and perhaps he will make a new grounding that fits.

Bodies and minds settled, we begin the chant. His pronunciation is poor, but this is a child's exercise and designed for a leader and a stumbling apprentice. The words rise, bearing the rhythm of wind and wave and the slow movement of the earth. Still chanting, I lift the knife, and watch Charlie follow my lead. I wash the blade in salt water and prick my finger. The sting is familiar, welcome. I let a drop of my blood fall into the bowl, swirling and spreading and fading into clarity. I have just enough time to see that Charlie has done the same before the room too fades, and my inward perceptions turn clear.

I am inside myself, seeing with my blood rather than my eyes. I am exquisitely aware of my body, and its power. My blood *is* a torrent. It is a river emptying into the ocean; it thunders through me, a cacophony of rapids and white water. I travel with it, checking paths I have not trod for eighteen years. I find them surprisingly in order. I should have known, watching mortals age while my hard-used joints still moved easily—but that river still carries its healing force, still sweeps illnesses and aches from the banks where they try to cling. Still reshapes what it touches, patiently and steadily. Still carries all the markers of a healthy child who will someday, still, go into the water. I remember my mother telling me, smiling, that my blood knew already the form I would someday wear.

I am basking in the feel of myself, loving my body for the first time in years, when everything changes. Just for a moment, I am aware of my skin, and a touch on my arm.

"Miss Marsh, are you okay?"

And now I remember that one learns to stay inside longer with practice, and that I entirely neglected to warn Charlie against touching me. And then I am cast out of my river, and into another.

I've never tried this with anyone outside my own people. Charlie's river is terribly weak—more like a stream, in truth. It has little power, and detritus has made it narrow and shallow. Where my body is yearning toward the ocean, his has already begun to dry out. His blood, too, knows the form he will someday wear.

He must now be seeing me as intimately.

I force the connection closed, saying the words that end the rite as quickly as I dare. I come to, a little dizzy, swaying.

Charlie looks far more shaken. "That … that was real. That was magic."

And I can only feel relief. Of course, the strangeness of his first spell must overwhelm any suspicion over the differences in our blood. At least for now.

* * *

Wilder's congregation trickled in over the next hour. They were male and female, robed richly or simply, but all with an air of confidence that suggested old families used to mortal power. They murmured when Wilder introduced them to me; some whispered more with Bergman afterward.

It only seemed like an endless aeon until they at last gathered in a circle. Wilder stood before the table, facing the low altar, and raised his arms. The circle quieted, till only their breath and the rustling of skirts and robes moved the air.

“Iä, iä, Cthulhu thtagn…” His accent was beyond abominable, but the prayer was familiar. After the fourth smoothly spoken mispronunciation, I realized that he must have learned the language entirely from books. While I had been denied wisdom writ solid in ink, he had been denied a guiding voice. Knowing he would not appreciate it now, I kept my peace. Even the mangled words were sweet.

The congregants gave their responses at the appropriate points, though many of them stumbled, and a few muttered nonsense rather than the proper words. They had learned from Wilder, some more newly than others. Many leaned forward, pupils dilated and mouths gaping with pleasure. Bergman’s shoulders held the tension of real fervor, but her lids were narrowed as she avidly watched the reactions she would not show herself. Her eyes met mine and her mouth twitched.

I remembered my mother, her self-contained faith a complement to my father’s easy affections. Bergman had the start of such faith, though she still seemed too conscious of her self-control.

After several minutes of call and response, Wilder knelt and took a golden necklet from where it had been hidden under the folds of the tablecloth. It was none of the work of my people—only a simple set of linked squares, with some abstract tentacular pattern carved in each one. It was as like the ornate bas-relief and wirework necklace-crowns of the deep as the ritual was like my childhood church. Wilder lifted it so that all could see, and Bergman stood before him. He switched abruptly to English: no translation that I recognized, presumably his own invention.

“Lady, wilt thou accept the love of Shub-Nigaroth? Wilt thou shine forth the wonders of life eternal for our mortal eyes?”

Bergman lifted her chin. “I shall. I am her sworn daughter, and the beloved of the Gods: let all welcome and return their terrible and glorious love.”

Wilder placed the chain around her neck. She turned to face the congregation, and he continued, now hidden behind her: “Behold the glory of the All-Mother!”

“Iä Cthulhu! Iä Shub-Nigaroth!”

“Behold the dance in darkness! Behold the life that knows not death!”

“Iä! Iä!”

“Behold the secret ever hidden from the sun! See it—breathe it—take it within you!”

At this the congregation fell silent, and I stumbled over a swallowed shout of joy. The words were half nonsense, but half closer to the spirit of my remembered services than anything Wilder had pulled from his books. Bergman took from the table a knife, and a chalice full of some dark liquid. As she turned to place it on the altar, the scent of plain red wine wafted to my nostrils. She pricked her finger and squeezed a drop of blood into the cup.

As we passed the chalice from hand to hand, the congregants each sipped reverently. They closed their eyes and sighed at private visions, or stared into the wine wondering before relinquishing it to the next. Yet when it came around to me, I tasted only wine. With time and space for my own art, I might have learned from it any secrets hidden in Bergman’s blood—but there was no magic here, only its trappings.

They were awkward, and ignorant, yearning and desperate. Wilder sought power, and Bergman feared to lose it, and the others likely ran the same range of pleasant and obnoxious company that I remembered from my lost childhood congregation. But whatever else they might be, Spector had been wrong. The government had no more to fear from them than it had from Innsmouth eighteen years ago.

* * *

As Charlie shuts the door to the back room, I can see his hands trembling. Outside this room he wears a cynical elder's mask, but in truth he is in his late thirties—close enough to my age to make little difference, were we both common mortals. And life has been kind to him. What I now offer has been his greatest frustration, and his eagerness is palpable.

As he moves to clear the floor, I hold up my hand. "Later, we'll try the Inner Sea again"—his unaccustomed smile blossoms—"but first I need to read you something. It may help you to better understand what you're seeing, when you look into your own blood."

What I seek can be found in at least three books on his shelf, but I take down the children's text, flipping carefully until I come to the well-remembered illustration: Earth and her moon, with thirteen forms arrayed around them. I trace the circle with one too-long finger.

"I told you that you can take or leave the gods, but the history is real. This is that history. We have evidence, and eyewitnesses, even for the parts that haven't happened yet. The Great Race of Yith travel through space and through time, and they are brutally honest with those who recognize them. The Litany of Earth was distilled over thousands of years of encounters: conversations that together have told us all the civilizations that came before the human one, and all the civilizations that will come after we're gone."

I wait, watching his face. He doesn't believe, but he's willing to listen. He lowers himself slowly into a chair, and rubs his knee absently.

I skip over the poetry of the original Enochian, but its prompting is sufficient to give me the English translation from memory.

"This is the litany of the peoples of Earth. Before the first, there was blackness, and there was fire. The Earth cooled and life arose, struggling against the unremembering emptiness.

"First were the five-winged eldermost of Earth, faces of the Yith. In the time of the elders, the archives came from the stars. The Yith raised up the

Shoggoth to serve them in the archives, and the work of that aeon was to restore and order the archives on Earth.

"Second were the Shoggoth, who rebelled against their makers. The Yith fled forward, and the Earth belonged to the Shoggoth for an aeon."

The words come easily, the familiar verses echoing back through my own short life. In times of hardship or joy, when a child sickened or a fisherman drowned too young for metamorphosis, at the new year and every solstice, the Litany gave us comfort and humility. The people of the air, our priest said, phrased its message more briefly: *This too shall pass.*

"Sixth are humans, the wildest of races, who share the world in three parts. The people of the rock, the K'n-yan, build first and most beautifully, but grow cruel and frightened and become the Mad Ones Under the Earth. The people of the air spread far and breed freely, and build the foundation for those who will supplant them. The people of the water are born in shadow on the land, but what they make beneath the waves will live in glory till the dying sun burns away their last shelter.

"Seventh will be the Ck'chk'ck, born from the least infestation of the houses of man, faces of the Yith." Here, at last, I see Charlie inhale sharply. "The work of that aeon will be to read the Earth's memories, to analyze and annotate, and to make poetry of the Yith's own understanding."

On I count, through races of artists and warriors and lovers and barbarians. Each gets a few sentences for all their thousands or millions of years. Each paragraph must obscure uncountable lives like mine, like Charlie's … like my mother's.

"Thirteenth will be the Evening People. The Yith will walk openly among them, raising them from their race's infancy with the best knowledge of all peoples. The work of that aeon will be copying the archives, stone to stone, and building the ships that will carry the archives, and the Evening, to distant stars. After they leave, the Earth will burn and the sun fade to ashes.

“After the last race leaves, there will be fire and unremembering emptiness. Where the stories of Earth will survive, none have told us.”

We sit for a minute in silence.

“You ever meet one of these Yith?” Charlie asks at last. He speaks urgently, braced against the answer. Everything else I’ve told him, he’s *wanted* to believe.

“I never have,” I say. “But my mother did, when she was a girl. She was out playing in the swamp, and he was catching mosquitoes. Normally you find them in libraries, or talking to scholars, but she isn’t the only person to encounter one taking samples of one sort or another. She asked him if mosquitoes would ever be people, and he told her a story about some Ck’chk’ck general, she thought the equivalent of Alexander the Great. She said that everyone asked her so many questions when she got home that she couldn’t remember the details properly afterward.” I shrug. “This goes with the magic, Mr. Day. Take them both, or turn your back.”

* * *

The basement door creaked, and skirts whispered against the frame.

“Oz,” came Bergman’s voice. “I wanted to talk to you about … Ah. It’s you.” She completed her regal descent. “Oz, what is *she* doing here?”

I rose, matching her hard stare. If I was to learn—or perhaps even teach—anything here, I needed to put a stop to this. And I still had to play a role.

“What exactly is it that you hold against me? I’ve come here many times, now. The others can see easily enough—none of them doubt what I am.”

She looked down at me. “You could be an imposter, I suppose. It would be easy enough. But it’s hardly the only possible threat we should be concerned about. If you are truly of the Deep Ones’ blood, why are you not with your noble kin? Why celebrate the rites here, among ordinary humans who want your secrets for themselves?”

Why are you not with your kin? I swallowed bitter answers. “My loneliness is no concern of yours.”

“I think it is.” She turned to Wilder, who had kept his place before the altar. “If she’s *not* a charlatan … either she’s a spy, sent to keep us from learning her people’s powers, or she’s in exile for crimes we cannot begin to imagine.”

I hissed, and unthinkingly thrust myself into her space, breathing the stink of her sharply exhaled breath. “They. Are. Dead.”

Bergman stepped back, pupils wide, breath coming too quickly. She drew herself up, straightened her skirts, and snorted. “Perhaps you are a charlatan after all. Everyone knows the Deep Ones cannot die.”

Again without thinking, I lunged for her. She stumbled backward and I caught her collar, twisted, and pulled. She fell forward, and I held her weight easily as she scrabbled to push me away. I blinked (eyes too big, too tight in their sockets), anger almost washed away by surprise. It was the first time the strength had come upon me.

And I had used it on an old mortal woman whose only crimes were pride and suspicion. I released her and turned my back. The joints of my fingers ached where I had clenched them. “Never say that again. Or if you must, say it to the soldiers who shot my father. We do not age, no—not like you do.” I could not resist the barb. “But there are many ways to die.”

Oz finally spoke, and I turned to see him helping Bergman to her feet. “Peace, Mildred. She’s no spy, and I think no criminal. She will not take your immortality from you.”

I paused, anger not entirely overwhelmed, and searched her features carefully. She was slender, small-eyed, fine-fingered—and unquestionably aged. For all her dignity, it was impossible that she might share even a drop of blood with my family.

She caught my look and smiled. “Yes, we have that secret from the Deep Ones. Does it surprise you?”

“Exceedingly. I was not aware that there *was* a secret. Not one that could be shared, at least.”

A broader, angrier smile. “Yes—you have tried to keep it from us. To keep us small and weak and dying. But we have it—and at the harvest moon, I will go into the water. I am beloved of the Elder Gods, and I will dwell in glory with Them under the waves forever.”

“I see.” I turned to Wilder. “Have you done this before?”

He nodded. “Mildred will be the third.”

“Such a wonderful promise. Why don’t you walk into the ocean yourself?”

“Oh, I shall—when I have trained a successor who can carry on in my place.” And he looked at me with such confidence that I realized whom he must have chosen for that role.

Mildred Bergman—convinced that life could be hoarded like a fortune—would never believe me if I simply *told* her the truth. I held up my hand to forestall anything else the priest might have to say. “Wilder, get out of here. I’ll speak with you later.”

He went. If he had convinced himself I would be his priestess, I suppose he had to treat me as one.

I sat down, cross-legged, trying to clear the hissing tension that had grown between us. After a moment she also sat, cautiously and with wincing stiffness.

“I’m sorry,” I said. “It doesn’t work like that. We go into the water, and live long there, because we have the blood of the deep in us. The love of the gods is not so powerful. I wish I had more to offer you. There are magics that can heal, that can ease the pains of age, that can even extend life for a few decades. I will gladly teach them to you.” And I would, too. She had been vile to me, but I could invite her to Charlie’s back room to study with us, and learn the arts that would give her both time and acceptance. All but one spell, that I would not teach, and did not plan to ever learn.

“You’re lying.” Her voice was calm and even.

“I’m not. You’re going to drown yourself—” I swallowed. “I’m trying to save your life. You haven’t done a speck of real magic in this room, you don’t know what it’s like, how it’s different.”

She started to say something, and I raised a hand. “No. I know you won’t listen to what I have to say. Please, let me show you.”

“Show me.” Not a demand—only an echo, full of doubt.

“Magic.” I looked at her, with my bulging eyes and thick bones, willing her, if she couldn’t yet believe, at least to look at me.

“What’s involved in this … demonstration?” she finally asked, and I released a held breath.

“Not much. Chalk, a pair of bowls, and a drop of blood.”

Between my purse and the altar, we managed to procure what was needed—fortunate, as I would have hated to go up and ask Wilder to borrow them. Having practiced this with Charlie, I still had the most basic of seals settled in my mind, at least clearly enough for this simple spell. I moved us away from the carefully laid tile to the raw flagstone behind the stairs. There was no reason to vandalize Wilder’s stage.

Bergman did not know the Litany, nor the cosmic humility that was the core of Sharhlyda practice. And yet, in some ways, she was easier to work with than Charlie. I could tell her to feel her blood as a river, without worrying what she might guess of my nature.

As I guided her through the opening meditation, Bergman’s expression relaxed into something calmer, more introspective. She had some potential for the art, I thought. More than Wilder, certainly, who was so focused on the theater of the thing, and on the idea of power. Bergman’s shoulders loosened, and her breath evened, but she kept her eyes open, waiting.

I pricked my finger and let the blood fall into the bowl, holding myself back from the spell long enough to wipe the blade and pass it to Bergman. Then I let the current pull me down …

Submerging only briefly before forcing myself upward, out of the cool ocean and into the harsh dry air. I took a painful breath, and laid my hand on Bergman's arm.

A thin stream moved through a great ravine, slow and emaciated. Rivulets trickled past great sandy patches. And yet, where they ran, they ran sweet and cool. The lines they etched, the bars and branches, made a fine and delicate pattern. In it I saw not only the inevitable decay that she strove against, but the stronger shape that was once hers—and the subtler strength in the shape she wore now.

"You *are* one of them."

I returned, gasping, all my instincts clamoring for moisture. I wanted to race upstairs and throw the windows open to the evening fog. Instead I leaned forward.

"Then you must also see—"

She sniffed, half a laugh. "I see that at least some of the books Wilder found can be trusted. And none of them have claimed that the Deep Ones are a more honest race than we. They do claim that you know more of the ancient lore than most humans have access to. So no, I don't believe that your immortality is a mere accident of birth. It can be ours as well—if we don't let you frighten us away from it."

We argued long and late, and still I could not move her. That night I argued with myself, sleepless, over whether it was my place to do more.

* * *

Of course Charlie asks, inevitably.

I have been teaching him the first, simplest healing spells. Even a mortal, familiar with his own blood, can heal small wounds, speed the passage of trivial illnesses and slow the terrible ones.

"How long can I live, if I practice this?" He looks at me thoughtfully.

“Longer. Perhaps an extra decade or three. Our natures catch up with us all, in the end.” I cringe inwardly, imagining his resentment if he knew. And I am beginning to see that he must know, eventually, if I continue with these lessons.

“Except for the Yith?”

“Yes.” I hesitate. Even were I ready to share my nature, this would be an unpleasant conversation, full of temptation and old shame. “What the Yith do … there *are* spells for that, or something similar. No one else has ever found the trick of moving through time, but to take a young body for your own … You would not find it in any of these books, but it wouldn’t be hard to track down. I haven’t, and I won’t. It’s not difficult, from what I’ve heard, just wrong.”

Charlie swallows and looks away. I let him think about it a moment.

“We forgive the Yith for what they do, though they leave whole races abandoned around fading stars. Because their presence means that Earth is remembered, and our memory and our stories will last for as long as they can find younger stars and younger bodies to carry them to. They’re as selfish as an old scholar wanting eighty more years to study and love and breathe the air. But we honor the Yith for sacrificing billions, and track down and destroy those who steal one life to preserve themselves.”

He narrows his eyes. “That’s very … practical of you.”

I nod, but look away. “Yes. We say that they do more to hold back darkness and chaos than any other race, and it is worth the cost. And of course, we know that we aren’t the ones to pay it.”

“I wonder if the … what were they called, the Leng … had a Nuremberg.”

I start to say that it’s not the same—the Yith hate nobody, torture nothing. But I cannot find it in me to claim it makes a difference. Oblivion, after all, is oblivion, however it is forced on you.

* * *

The day after my fourth meeting with Spector, I did not go to work. I walked, in the rain and the chill, in the open air, until my feet hurt, and then I kept walking, because I could. And eventually, because I could, I went home.

Mama Rei was mending, Kevin on the floor playing with fabric scraps. The *Chronicle* lay open on the table to page seven, where a single column reported the previous night's police raid on a few wealthy homes. No reason was given for the arrests, but I knew that if I read down far enough, there would be some tittering implication of debauchery. Mama Rei smiled at me sadly, and flicked her needle through a stocking. The seam would not look new, but would last a little longer with her careful stitching.

"You told him," she said. "And he listened."

"He promised me there would be no camps." Aloud, now, it sounded like a slender promise by which to decide a woman's fate.

Flick. "Does he seem like an honorable man?"

"I don't know. I think so. He says that the ones they can't just let go, they'll send to a sanitarium." Someplace clean, where their needs would be attended to, and where they would be well fed. "He says Wilder really does belong there. He believed what he was telling the others. What he was telling Bergman."

And she believed what he told her—but that faith would not have been enough to save her.

No one's faith ever was.

Flick. Flick. The needle did a little dance down and around, tying off one of her perfect tiny knots. Little copper scissors, a gift purchased with my earnings and Anna's, cut the dangling thread. "You should check on her."

"I don't think she'll want to see me."

Mama Rei looked at me. "Aphra-chan."

I ducked my head. “You’re right. I’ll make sure they’re treating her well.”

But they would, I knew. She would be confined in the best rooms and gardens that her money could pay for, all her physical needs attended to. Kind men would try to talk her back from the precipice where I had found her. And they would keep her from drowning herself until her blood, like that of all mortals, ran dry.

I wondered if, as she neared the end, she would still pray.

If she did, I would pray with her. If it was good for nothing else, at least the effort would be real.

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December 1948 – January 1949

Christmas followed close on Winter Tide. The Christian holiday first filled Charlie's store with customers, then drew them all back into the seas of their families. Even he closed shop for the day and went to church services —awkwardly, I gathered, given his current beliefs. The Kotos, being Shinto, celebrated neither holiday, though Mama Rei and Neko surprised me after my post-Tide rest with a fish stew, studded with dried cranberries and salted almost to the traditional level for Innsmouth feast days.

To my relief, Charlie's treatment of me didn't change. The days between Christmas and New Years were quiet, and we spent most of our time studying in the back room. When we returned to the public area, we found that the holiday customers had left it much in need of straightening. The pervasiveness of the foreign holiday had left me jittery: I fell to with a will, and spent happy hours sorting genre from genre and author from author.

Even the most ill-formed words, set to paper, are a great blessing. Still, I was not indiscriminate, and when I found a truly execrable passage in Flash Gordon and the Monsters of Mongo, I decided I'd enjoy hearing Charlie's opinion. I drifted forward with one long finger marking my place, stopping occasionally to retrieve a book from the floor or straighten a row of spines. As I neared the counter, I heard Charlie's raised voice:

"I don't need you in here bothering my employee. Take whatever folders and files you've brought this time and get out."

I toyed with the idea of letting Charlie drive him away. But as always, I could not feel safe turning my back.

I stepped out from my haven among the shelves. "It's all right, Mr. Day. I'll speak with him. Hello, Mr. Spector."

He ducked his head. "Miss Marsh." His eye caught on the book, and his lips quirked. I clutched it tighter, then forced my hands to relax. I let my finger slip from the page I'd meant to share.

“You have something you wish to ask me. Ask it.” I braced myself, praying quietly for anything other than another ‘cult.’ I didn’t think I could bear another room of my fellow worshippers chanting familiar words and phrases that would turn out to be another mask for suicidal delusion. Or worse, for something more malicious than that self-proclaimed high priest’s desperate and contagious yearning for immortality.

And yet, if Spector told me of such a group, I didn’t think I could stay away.

He shuffled, glanced at Charlie. Charlie glared back.

“He stays,” I said. Then added: “He knows.”

Spector looked away, his skin reddening. I was not sorry to see his shame. He shook it off quickly enough. He took out a cigarette, tapped it on the counter, but didn’t light it. “I suppose you’ve heard about what’s happening with the Russians.”

One could hardly miss the papers—and I shared with the Kotos a fervent desire to see coming, early, the storms that might rile people against us. “Yes, the blockade in Berlin. Your allies are fickle.”

He shrugged. “They don’t see the world as we do. They expect everyone to think alike, act alike—and they’ll fight for it, if we let things get that far.”

In spite of myself, I shivered. The idea of another war … the World War—the first one—had taken so many of Innsmouth’s young men into the Army, returned many of them to sit blank-eyed and frightened on their porches—and perhaps triggered the paranoia of those whose libel brought the final raid on our town. The next war had stolen the Kotos from their lives and forced them to rebuild a community almost from scratch.

He continued. “We’re working to stop them as best we can. There’s the new defense department, and the new agency for collecting foreign intelligence. I’m not involved with that directly—” He patted his suit pocket, as if I might forget the badge secreted there. “—but we all work together, when we have to.”

“Of course,” I sighed.

“And the Russians have what, exactly, to do with Miss Marsh?” demanded Charlie.

“Nothing at all,” said Spector. “Except that someone’s gotten it into their heads that the Russians might use magic against us. And they’ve consulted with the FBI’s experts on—er—our domestic arts, to learn what they ought to do about it.”

I set the book down on the counter. “Mr. Spector, you don’t need me to tell you that magic makes a poor weapon. It’s not a tool for power, but for knowledge. And a limited tool, at that, unless you appreciate knowledge for its own sake. If your Russians are such scholars, you have little to fear from them.”

“We have little to fear from the magical arts that were legal in Innsmouth.”

Charlie’s glare faltered. He knew the stories about what spells were forbidden, and why.

Spector pulled out a lighter and lit the cigarette. I stepped back discreetly. Charlie normally took his pipe outside in deference to my lungs, but I could hardly expect the same from others. Spector took a drag, and seemed fortified. “In short, they’re afraid that the Russians will learn how to force themselves into other people’s bodies—and use it not for personal immortality, but to take the place of our best scientists, our most influential politicians. The potential damage is staggering.”

“It is,” I said faintly. I thought about the bombs that had been dropped on Japan, and the potential for sabotage or theft in the secret places where they were kept. And I thought, too, about subtler things—words that could turn neighbor against neighbor, or government against citizen. “But I’m afraid I don’t have anything that can help you. To the best of my knowledge, there are no Deep settlements in the Pacific. If the Russians learned these arts, they didn’t learn them from us.” And while I could

imagine one of our criminals deciding that switching with a Russian would put them sufficiently far from home to avoid capture, we would certainly have noticed if a bitter old man started speaking in a foreign tongue. Not to mention that most human versions of the art required direct contact, and Russian tourists didn't generally visit Innsmouth.

"The Yith?" asked Charlie quietly.

"They don't share their methods," I said. "That's why humanity's versions of the spell are less powerful. But they all stem from imitations of visiting Yith. Russians could have learned that way as easily as anyone else; magic is no harder for men of the air than for us, merely less well known. And no, Mr. Spector, I know of no defense against body-theft, nor any reliable way to detect it."

He shook his head. "That's not what I'm asking for—though I wouldn't turn down a defense if you surprised me with one. The analysts believe they didn't recreate the art on their own—but they may have sent someone to study at Miskatonic, some years back."

While I stared, he went on, "I know you don't like working for us directly. But I also know you have your own reasons for wanting to study that school's records. We've persuaded them to accept a research delegation from the federal government. I would hope—that is, we wish to sponsor you to come along as a research assistant and language specialist. You're more fluent in Enochian, and I suspect many of the other relevant languages, than anyone we can provide."

I put a hand on the counter to steady myself. "Answer one question for me. Are you responsible for my brother's inability to access the Miskatonic libraries, these past months?"

"No, of course not." He shook his head vehemently. "Though we were aware of it. You must know that the, ah, activities of everyone released by Public Proclamation number 24 have been—kept abreast of—" Seeing my look, he hurried on. "But we've left him alone." His lip quirked. "It might

be better not to ask how we persuaded Miskatonic to offer our chosen scholars access, names unseen."

"It might be better to tell me." I crossed my arms. "Mr. Spector, I do want to see that library, very badly. But I will have no blood on my hands."

He stepped back and held up his palms, a warding gesture echoed in a trail of smoke. "No blood, I promise." He paused. "Miss Marsh, I wish you would give us some benefit of the doubt, however small."

"I am willing to speak with you. To listen. It will take a long time for your masters to earn more."

"The lady asked you a question," Charlie said.

Spector sighed. "If you must know, there's a particular dean with a penchant for carrying on with the maids. Not always entirely to their taste. His most recent girl works for us, and is a bit less easily cowed than the previous ones. He does us favors, sometimes, in exchange for keeping it all from his wife. And from the papers; Miskatonic prides itself on being a respectable school, after all."

It was certainly as distasteful as he'd implied. I could hardly blame the woman for what she'd done—not given some of the favors Anna had won for us, when she was new to the camp and the soldiers grateful to suddenly find pretty, untainted girls under their charge. "Did you order her into that?"

"The girls get a certain amount of discretion in these things. You have to understand, she was already…" He trailed off, seeing something in my face, or Charlie's. "She likes it better than her previous job."

Not blood, then, on my hands. I swallowed and thought of the books. Spector was still good at making offers that I couldn't find a way to ignore. And this time, I couldn't refuse his offer and inquire on my own: without the state's support, we'd remain as we were, with my brother hopelessly rattling Miskatonic's gates.

If he needed us, I could at least set terms. "I won't go alone. I'll need my brother. And Mr. Day as well." When Mr. Spector looked doubtful, I

added, “His Enochian is coming along nicely,” though I suspected that was not where his questions lay.

* * *

April 1947: Much as I’d prefer to speak with Spector in my own territory, I meet him at the FBI’s local office. This conversation shames me, and I’d rather Charlie didn’t hear it.

The office is just outside Japantown, and shows signs of having lost staff in recent years. Spector, on loan from the east coast, pulls chairs over to one of the empty desks with an apologetic shrug. Behind him, I see dusty file cabinets labeled in tiny, faded print.

“I visited the congregation,” I begin.

“I wondered if you might. If you’re willing to tell us about it, we could —” He stops himself. “Never mind. You found something you thought was important. Please go on.”

I try to guess what he didn’t say—was he thinking of offering payment? Should I be angry that he thought of it, or grateful that he thought better?

“They’re no threat to anyone else,” I start. “I want to make that clear. If you don’t believe me there’s no point in going on.”

“I believe you.” He sounds sincere enough. I wish I didn’t have to second-guess every word.

“They believe that they’re beloved of the gods, and that if one of them walks deep into the Pacific, unafraid and unflinching, Shub-Nigaroth will grant them immortality. Two of them went through the ritual before I got there. The others are convinced that their old friends are ‘living in glory under the waves,’ but I can assure you these people are entirely mortal—and the gods are not so attentive to human demands as they insist. Mildred Bergman, their priestess, is next. And—soon.”

“I’ll set something up,” he assures me. “We’ll keep them safe. And Miss Marsh—I’ll do my damnedest to make sure no one treats them like the

enemy."

* * *

Neko came to me after the washing up, while I was working on a letter to Caleb.

"I want to go with you," she said.

"Neko-chan, what for?" It took a moment for me to realize the source of my startlement: I still thought of her as the 13-year-old new come to the camp, and all too much like myself at the same age. But in fact she was 19, through with her schooling, more than ready to seek a husband or help support the household. She had been slower about both than Mama Rei would have wished, but that did not make her less an adult.

She twisted her hands together and stared at the floor. "I could go along as a secretary. You're going to need someone to take notes, and keep track of what you find."

"I think the FBI already has secretaries." I thought of the woman who'd paid for our entry with her own flesh, and shivered. I owed that woman something, though I doubted she would accept it even if I could figure out what it was.

"Your G-man would bring me along if you asked."

"G-man?"

She shrugged it away. "Like in the movies. Please, Kappa-sama."

I chose my words carefully, trying to explain something that had barely needed saying in Innsmouth. "Miskatonic University is not a nice place. The professors—they are old men, proud of their power, frightened of anyone who might threaten it. They care nothing for responsibilities or obligations outside the school. They are not evil, but nor are they good to be around unless one has a truly important reason."

Her eyes slid toward the kitchen, where Mama Rei still remained sweeping. "You go out in the rain, without an umbrella or a coat. And you

come home wet and happy."

I smiled in spite of myself. "The water is good for me."

"But it's not just that." She glanced at me, suddenly shy in a way that reminded me more reasonably of her younger self. "It's a thing you couldn't do, and now you can. Mama doesn't understand, but—please forgive me, but when you were my age, you were still there, but I'm here and I don't want to waste my freedom just taking dictation from old men—and there are plenty in San Francisco, too!"

"Old men who love power are everywhere, I'm afraid," I admitted.

"I know. But I think that travel could be the rain, for me. And Mama will never let me try it, not if we had to pay, even if we could afford it. But if I'm going along with you, if you asked, she wouldn't argue. And then I would know. If it's what I should be doing."

Few enough of us get to do what we should be doing—assuming that such a thing even exists. I would not be the one to forbid her the rain.

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